

A Circle Still Unbroken  
by Peter Stone Brown

Nitty Gritty Dirt Band & Guests: *Will The Circle Be Unbroken* (Capitol)  
Doc Watson with Frosty Morn: *'Round The Table Again* (Sugar Hill)

Thirty years before T Bone Burnett gathered a bunch of excellent musicians in a Nashville studio to re-create early country music for the *O Brother* soundtrack, the **Nitty Gritty Dirt Band** enticed such legendary country artists as Mother Maybelle Carter, Roy Acuff, Merle Travis, Doc Watson, Earl Scruggs and Jimmy Martin to join them in the studio for a week of sessions playing country music resulting in the landmark three-record set, *Will The Circle Be Unbroken*.

In addition to turning on an entire generation to country musicians they might not have paid attention to otherwise, this album also served to give the Dirt Band, who were coming off a pretty big hit with "Mr. Bojangles" and were considered a good but not great band, something they strongly desired, credibility.

Recently reissued by Capitol as a two-CD set complete with the mandatory bonus tracks, the album more than holds up. In fact it possibly sounds more vital now than it did back then. Assisted by some of the best pickers as session players at the time such as bassist Junior Huskey, Pete "Oswald" Kirby on dobro, amazing fiddle player, Vassar Clements, guitarist Norman Blake and Randy Scruggs who was just emerging as a guitar ace, there's a natural ease to the playing that results not only in a celebration of this music but a celebration of young getting together with old to keep the tradition going. It is clear with every note that all the musicians are having one hell of a good time.

The music encompasses the various genres within country with a healthy dose of bluegrass instrumentals, which on the original release took up almost an entire side of the album. Bluegrass for the most part means fast, and the combination of Earl Scruggs on banjo, with Vassar Clements on fiddle, with either Norman Blake or Randy Scruggs on lead guitar is hard to beat. The Dirt Band weren't slouches either and John McEuen on banjo and Les Thompson on mandolin easily hold their own with the masters. And as much as this speedy picking is often about showing off, on this album it is done without flash, always with taste and the result is both pleasurable and amazing.

While the legendary singers did their classics, whether Maybelle Carter doing "Keep On The Sunnyside" and "Wildwood Flower;" Merle Travis on "Dark As A Dungeon" and "Nine Pound Hammer;" Jimmy Martin's "Sunny

Side of The Mountain” and “You Don’t My Mind” or Acuff with “Wreck On The Highway” and “I Saw The Light,” they never come off as set period pieces, they come off as alive. Whether the original recording of the song was better or not never comes into question.

It seems silly now, but it’s important to remember at the time this record was made, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band were more or less hippies, particularly in the eyes of Nashville and many of the musicians, Acuff in particular were as right-wing as you could get. According to the new liner notes of the reissue, Acuff said in an interview, “I’ll play *real* country music anytime, anywhere, with anyone,” and producer Bill McEuen wanted to see if he’d live up to that statement. Acuff does more than live up to it. His singing on this album is definitely in the so real it’s scary category.

If there’s a problem with this album, it is the overuse of between-song conversation. On one hand, it gives you the live in the studio feel, but on the other a lot of it is superfluous. One exception to this where Doc Watson meets for the first time one of his great influences, Merle Travis, telling him how he named his son after him and then goes on to make Travis guess what his favorite Travis album is. The most unnecessary of these tidbits is only on the reissue as a bonus track, where they’re figuring out the arrangement to “Keep On The Sunnyside.” That it doesn’t lead into the song itself makes no sense and ultimately it is a one-time listen.

While the Dirt Band for the most part leaves the singing to their guests, the vocals of Jimmie Fadden, Jim Ibbotson and Jeff Hanna on a trio of Hank Williams songs fit right in.

The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band ended up fading out of the limelight once this album’s impact had passed, but they are still together, in fact touring this summer. Still, they deserve not only credit, but also thanks for bringing this incredible group of musicians together and making it work. Those who may have recently discovered real country music on soundtrack albums should absolutely check this album out. *Will The Circle Be Unbroken* is about playing music and playing music is what it’s all about.

When she was well into her late ’70s, my grandmother who as far as I knew never listened to music except to watch Lawrence Welk every week on TV, blew my mind one day by saying, “I saw **Doc Watson** on TV the other night and he played and sang beautifully.” That Doc Watson appealed to my grandmother actually shouldn’t be surprising. Perhaps the only “real” folksinger to emerge from the ’60s folk movement, he’s a good, almost always pleasant singer and of course one of the greatest guitarists alive. What is surprising is that after more than 40 years, Doc Watson is still

pretty much in the folk camp, playing colleges, small halls and clubs. He's never been signed to a major label, but maybe he wants it that way.

On *Round The Table Again* (Sugar Hill), which reunites him in concert with his (late) son Merle's band Frosty Morn, he is introduced as a "national treasure." That description couldn't be more accurate.

If age has caught up with Watson (who was supposed to retire from performing several times) it's not evident. His voice may be a tinge huskier, but that's it. His crystal clear picking is as fluent and astounding as ever.

His repertoire has always been intriguing. At this show, he goes from traditional country such as Clarence Ashley's "Coo Coo Bird," to Merle Haggard's "Working Man Blues," to Jimmie Rodgers, Blind Boy Fuller, and for better or worse the Moody Blues.

Frosty Morn is joined on this album by Merle Watson's son, Richard who shows during his occasional solos that he's inherited both his father's and grandfather's guitar talents. Frosty Morn provide subtle but not necessarily stellar backing for Doc. However when they take over the singing for a few originals, Mance Lipscomb's "Sugar Babe" and a useless version of Dylan's, "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere," it seems like an interruption more than anything else. The one exception is the bluegrass gospel original "Court On High."

Watson give a lengthy explanation to "Nights In White Satin," saying he never thought he would do it on stage, and even though he kind of pulls it off, one has to wonder why he did. More successful is his cover of the Moonglow's hit, "Sincerely."

The album ends strangely with an unlisted bonus track collage of various (rehearsal?) outtakes with snippets of songs on the album and some that aren't. While the good moments are very good, this album is for die-hard Doc Watson fans.